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NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

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April 2, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR GENERAL HAIG

FROM: Sven Kraemer *SK*

SUBJECT: MemCon on April 1, 1971
Meeting on Vietnam

Attached is a memorandum of conversation which I prepared on yesterday's meeting in San Clemente. I have checked the substance of the memcon with Dick Smyser and Bob Sansom.

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MEMORANDUM

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

PARTICIPANTS: Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, General Alexander Haig, Colonel Richard Kennedy, Winston Lord, Wayne Smith, W. Richard Smyser, Robert Sansom, Sven Kraemer

PLACE: The Western White House; San Clemente, California
April 1, 1971 - 10:40 a.m. to 12:50 p.m.

Dr. Kissinger: I have read the different reports. We can't kid ourselves. We need accurate assessments on: Lam Son, future prospects and what we ought to do. What about Lam Son?

Dr. Smith: My new assessment paper on Lam Son 719 will be available tomorrow -- CIA is arguing that diversion of throughput and battle consumption of predispositioned stockpiles, rather than impedance caused by Allied operations, is chief impact of Lam Son.

Mr. Sansom: CIA seems to underestimate losses due to bombing. CIA argues that enemy's already programmed planning factor of 25% bombing attrition held constant. But DIA, while not specific, says enemy suffered some increase in losses beyond this planning factor as a result of the bombing.

Dr. Kissinger: CIA has tended to take an Ivy League view of the war. Its estimates have always been low. But assuming CIA is right, what does this suggest about the enemy's future plans?

Dr. Smith: A protracted war.

Dr. Kissinger: In III and IV Corps?

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Dr. Kissinger: In I and II Corps?

Dr. Smith: Yes. High points will still be possible in 1971, but not Tet-style offensives.

Mr. Sansom: I. e. no sustained ground offensives in Vietnam. Furthermore, no major offensive action can be expected in Cambodia in '71.

Dr. Kissinger: What is a "sustained ground offensive" or a "major offensive action?"

Mr. Sansom: A two regiment ground attack on an ARVN ranger base near Kontum would be a major offensive action. A major attack on a population center in Kontum would involve a sustained ground offensive.

Dr. Kissinger: Why can't enemy undertake such action?

Mr. Sansom: Because of Lam Son 719, the enemy has been unable to forward deploy his ground stocks.

Dr. Smith: The enemy would be lucky to build back to protracted warfare levels in I Corps and II Corps in '71.

Mr. Sansom: Another factor is that the enemy now needs to provide security for the Trail through the end of the dry season.

Dr. Smith: The enemy is therefore sensitive to ARVN raids, such as yesterday's.

Dr. Kissinger: If ARVN goes in. They are already out since yesterday. Are the estimates cited above and those of the Smith/Program Analysis paper realistic assumptions?

Mr. Sansom: They are.

Dr. Kissinger: CIA is unclear about the stocks at Tchepone. Were these stocks to be used for a major offensive in I or II Corps or for defense against an expected RVN attack?

Mr. Sansom: Or as a hedge for the next dry season?

Dr. Kissinger: What is the bomb destruction estimate?

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Mr. Sansom: DIA's paper has an estimate on caches and supplies destroyed somewhat lower than CIA's. But when DIA's bomb damage assessment (BDA) is added to their caches and supplies destroyed, the total figure is higher than CIA's.

Dr. Kissinger: That's the first time a DIA estimate has been below CIA's. Do these estimates include losses at the big dump which we hit?

Mr. Sansom: No, these estimates do not include the dump. CIA includes no tonnage for BDA.

Dr. Kissinger: Where do we stand on the question of whether this year's enemy force in South Laos is 10,000 or 20,000 greater than last year?

Mr. Sansom: CIA says 22,000 extra NVA came down Trail, with 10,000 of these as replacements. The enemy figures are uncertain.

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Dr. Kissinger: Let's get DIA to provide an updated Order of Battle estimate. Is the throughput of supplies in the DIA range?

Mr. Sansom: One can't put much faith in either DIA or CIA estimates. It is too early. Also, throughput data is harder to collect than input data as there are fewer and more reliably checked input points at the narrow north section of the Trail, than at the other end.

Dr. Kissinger: What if there had been an offensive in I and II Corps? Would it have been better to wait for it or to undertake Lam Son?

Dr. Smith: It was better to undertake Lam Son. This was on our terms rather than the enemy's. We chose the time and place of attack. And this way there were also far fewer U. S. casualties.

Mr. Sansom: Militarily, we had to do Lam Son. We needed a credible threat to enemy forces in South Laos. This was last time we could strike with large forces.

Mr. Lord: The political costs of a successful enemy offensive in I Corps would have been greater. Therefore Lam Son was better.

Mr. Sansom: Major sustained ground attacks by the enemy in II Corps' highlands and in Cambodia would have been more costly than Lam Son.

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Mr. Smyser: Agrees with above.

Mr. Sansom: CIA, which doesn't generally point to enemy logistics weaknesses, now says NVA logistics are constrained and that the enemy is hurting in Cambodia.

Dr. Kissinger: What about Lam Son's impact on President Thieu's position?

Mr. Smyser: The operation's favorable impact on security in the countryside is an important factor as the '71 Vietnamese elections approach. Generally, security in the countryside in '71 is fairly assured even in I and II Corps. -- Thieu's opposition is confused and divided. Ky is hurting himself by talking to some of the people he formerly put in prison. It will be difficult for Ky and Minh to separate Thieu from the Army effort in criticizing unfavorable aspects of Lam Son. Thieu may have some problems with the military's "Baby Turks" critical of General Lam's corruption and the lack of coordination in high places.

Dr. Kissinger: We need a paper on the political situation. -- The different enemy input estimates we are getting all estimate a maximum enemy effort. E. g. one estimate of 90,000 tons into the system is higher by 30,000 than the previous highest enemy rate. -- In view of these estimates, will '72 show the enemy forced into a later time frame for major offensives or forced into a position of lower intensity of actions prior to a major offensive?

Dr. Smith: These suppositions are correct. Additionally, the enemy will also be forced to live off the land to an increased extent.

Dr. Kissinger: In military terms, would a U. S. troop withdrawal rate of 12,000 become a problem if the rate was altered by plus or minus 500 a month? Is there a group consensus that plus or minus 500 a month would not matter?

Group: All agree that a plus or minus 500 change would matter significantly only in political, not in military, terms.

Dr. Kissinger: In military terms, would speeding up the U. S. withdrawal increments by e. g. 6 weeks this fall make a difference?

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Mr. Sansom: Except for the DMZ, the timing of redeployments before 1 January '72 is not critical. However at the DMZ the main force threat in 1971 is sensitive to U. S. redeployments because there the enemy is not logically constrained and there the dry season runs from May to October rather than from October to May as it does elsewhere in Vietnam.

Dr. Smith: The U. S. draw down will also presumably be affected by the fact that the enemy can probably replace his stocks in I and II Corps by next March.

Mr. Sanson: By next February.

Dr. Kissinger: What is basis for these estimates? What other factors are involved?

Mr. Smyser: The October '71 elections in Vietnam mark an important early political date affecting the U. S. withdrawal rates.

Col. Kennedy: A withdrawal speed-up cannot be gauged only on a short term basis. The U. S. withdrawal pattern is one of a continuous downward trend, not a fluctuating one. Once out, the U. S. troops are no longer available.

Mr. Smyser: Speeded up reductions this fall would have the effect of giving up Allied flexibility next year.

Mr. Kraemer: We must protect Vietnam's election environment this fall. Announcements of greatly accelerated withdrawals or setting a terminal date would probably cause political unravelling in Vietnam.

Dr. Kissinger: We need a systematic, rational analysis of different factors and the impact of Lam Son on withdrawal rates this year.

Group: There is a general consensus against straight line U. S. troop withdrawals and concern about too rapid draw-downs.

Dr. Kissinger: Among many irresponsible withdrawals, it must be possible to choose the more responsible one.

Mr. Lord: Our troops may make the difference in Vietnam.

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Mr. Sansom: That's true at DMZ, where the NVA has no logistics constraints. There will be bad trouble in I Corps next year.

General Haig: There is also an issue concerning the interface of U. S. troop withdrawals and RVNAF's ability to absorb added equipment, bases and responsibilities.

Dr. Kissinger: Where do we stand next year? Will the Allies be run out of I and II Corps.

Mr. Sansom: That is a possibility.

Dr. Kissinger: If the enemy will succeed in getting us out next year anyway, we can't put this country through another Tet. -- Are these estimates of enemy capability based on maximum potential or on realistic enemy strengths?

Dr. Smith: These estimates are based on the enemy's maximum potential. These are maximum estimates. They assume the same or higher enemy logistics push and no new Lam Son -type moves against the Trail. The balance could, however, be favorably affected by such steps as moving ARVN combat battalions from III and IV Corps to I Corps.

General Haig: The threat is perhaps not so much to be feared in I Corps next year as in II Corps.

Mr. Sansom: Agrees. But ARVN 1st Division in I Corps must be strengthened.

Dr. Kissinger: If the enemy gets Qui Nhon (on Northern II Corps' coast), what will he have?

Mr. Sansom: A bargaining chip.

Col. Kennedy: An enormous political defeat for Allies. Our television will have a field day. It could unravel things.

Dr. Kissinger: What if the enemy gives the Allies some other setbacks?

Mr. Smyser: They would be seeking to get a new U. S. president elected.

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Dr. Kissinger: If the U. S. elections appeared close and the enemy's actions affect our elections, then they will attack. But supposing that the President's chances are either very good or very bad, or that enemy actions make no difference, then would the enemy have incentives to settle? And after Secretary Laird's statements on U. S. troop strength in late '72, why shouldn't the enemy negotiate now rather than spend a costly year or more waiting to negotiate about the very small number of U. S. forces then remaining in Vietnam?

Mr. Smyser: The enemy think they can influence our public opinion and get a more favorable candidate and president. There is still a less than even chance for significant diplomatic initiative by the other side.

Dr. Smith/Mr. Sansom: The balance can be strengthened significantly by such steps as relocating and/or adding ARVN divisions in I and II Corps, by providing a pay increase for ARVN

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Dr. Smith: One should also note North Vietnam's manpower constraints as pointed out in the Smith paper (at page 8).

General Haig: It is possible that the enemy may be going back to the long haul.

Dr. Kissinger: They will need to get Cambodia, as they can't depend solely on the Trail system.

Dr. Smith/ Mr. Smyser: We might want to put a stronger image on in Paris about the President's cease-fire proposals. Wayne Smith has done a paper on the subject.

Dr. Kissinger: Let's have an SRG meeting on Wayne Smith's cease-fire paper.

Dr. Kissinger: Is it our feeling that politically, South Vietnam can hold through 1972. What of the withdrawals?

Mr. Kraemer: Thieu can hold fairly well through '72. The constitutional system is gaining increasing participation and the opposition is divided and ineffective. Very rapid withdrawals or terminal date announcement, however, could lead to a psychological and political unravelling.

Dr. Kissinger: What would be the nature of such an unravelling?

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Mr. Kraemer: Thieu's opponents would gain strength and initiative. The momentum of pacification and Vietnamization would be broken early. Thieu might bow out and accommodations on the other side's terms would be probable.

Dr. Kissinger: Smyser, Kraemer and Negroponte should do a paper on the political situation and prospects in Vietnam and on negotiations. -- Smith and Sansom should revise their paper to reflect high and low estimates for 172 of enemy capability. Papers should also be prepared on RVNAF's needs and on Cambodia.

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